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ABSTRACT

A comparative study of turn-taking in North American and Spanish conversation investigated (1) differences in styles for the two cultures and (2) any resulting misinterpretation of communicative intentions. Data for the first were drawn from two dinner parties, one with four American women, conducted in English, and one with four Spanish-speaking women, conducted in Spanish. Analysis of the conversations focused on overlap, measured in syllables, and pause, measured in seconds. The major finding was more occasions of overlap than expected in both English and Spanish conversations, and much greater duration of overlap in the Spanish conversation. In both languages, overlaps were caused by various frequent but usually unintentional patterns such as simultaneous starts, additions to an utterance after appearing to have finished it, interruptions, and sharing of the same information. The difference in average length of overlap is attributed to three patterns in Spanish: longer back-channel utterances, including repetition; use of collaborative sequences; and continued speaking during overlap. Interviews with the participants about previous interaction with the other culture showed the potential for cross cross-cultural misunderstanding was increased in those areas where turn-taking styles in Spanish and English differed, particularly differing quantity of overlap and backchannel behaviors. (MSE)

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ABSTRACT

Research on turn taking in English indicates that there are rules that Americans follow when organizing their conversations. Following these rules, consciously or subconsciously, helps ensure a good conversation because the rules are based on what Americans consider polite, cooperative and efficient. Research on turn taking in other languages, and even in different dialects of English, indicates that the organization of conversation is sometimes different. I have found that the turn-taking styles of some native Spanish speakers is different from that of American speakers of English, and that those differences can cause both groups to misinterpret the other's intentions.

The data consist of two one-hour segments of dinner conversation, one involving four Spanish women and one involving four American women. I examined the turn-taking styles of the participants, paying special attention to overlap and use of backchannel. Then I conducted playback interviews with each of the participants in order to determine what assumptions underlie the different turn-taking styles.

BACKGROUND

Perhaps the most complete discussion of turn taking to date comes from Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). They describe a systematic characterization of turn taking in conversation which they claim is context-free (not bound to any particular context) and yet context-sensitive (fitted to the particulars of context). Their model is based on a set of facts, four of which are relevant here (the numbers associated with these facts are those found in the original):

2) Overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time.
3) Occurrences of more than one speaker at a time are common, but brief.
4) Transitions from one turn to a next with no gap and no overlap between them are common. Together with transitions characterized by slight gap or slight overlap, they make up the vast majority of transitions.

14) Repair mechanisms for dealing with turn-taking errors and violations obviously are available for use. For example, if two parties find them selves talking at the same time, one of them will stop prematurely, thus repairing the trouble (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974, pp. 10-11).

Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson defend these facts with the ideas of turn-constructional unit (TCU) and transition-relevance place (TRP). That is, each turn at talk, whatever type or unit it may be (word, phrase, sentence, etc.), has a possible unit completion point that is projectable before its occurrence. A TRP is a completion point at which it would be possible, but not necessary, to change speakers. So, whoever is listening, can predict the completion point of the TCU and know when to speak, avoiding any overlap. Oreström (1982) agrees about the existence of projectable turn completion points. In the conversations he examined, 95% of the turns ended in a grammatical boundary (marked by a prosodically, syntactically, and semantically completed sequence), and 45% also coincided with a reduction in loudness and pause. Listeners apparently could predict the end of a turn based on these cues to the extent that 87% of the turns involved no simultaneous speech.

However, actual conversation does not always work the way it is described in Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's facts (2), (3), and (4). The New Yorkers in Tannen's (1984) study of the conversation at a Thanksgiving dinner exhibited what Tannen called a high-involvement style which included frequent use of overlap. Kilpatrick (1986) recorded Puerto Ricans speaking Spanish and found that 95% of the turns started or ended in simultaneous speech. Wieland (1991) recorded conversations in French between French and American women and found that the French women overlapped twice as much as the Americans. Nor is fact (14) an appropriate description in every case, since the overlaps and simultaneous speech found in these studies were not necessarily considered "turn-taking errors and violations" by the participants.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The studies mentioned above show that not all speakers in all situations fit Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson's model. Are they the exception to the rule, or are there other groups of people and other instances that fail to fit the model as well? And if their model does not always apply, how do different conversational styles affect the participants' perceptions of each other. The study reported on here was designed to answer the following questions, which emerged from the results of similar studies done in this area and from my own observation of daily interactions between Spanish and American speakers.

1) Are there differences in Spanish and American turn-taking styles?
2) If there are differences, do they cause each group to misinterpret the other's intentions in speaking the way they do?

METHODOLOGY

In order to answer this question, I hosted two dinner parties. To the first, I invited four American women, and we spoke English. To the second, I invited four Spanish women, and we spoke Spanish. If the Spanish speakers used a style different from the Americans, that should be apparent in the comparison of the styles used during the two dinners.

All of the subjects were graduate students at the same university between the ages of 25 and 35. They were all women, since some research shows differences in the conversational styles of men and women. Three of the Americans were born and raised in the suburbs of Chicago and one was raised in the Boston area. Three had lived in Spain. The Spanish speakers all came from the central and northern parts of Spain, and had been living in the U.S. between two and five years. All of the participants were people who I have found to be open to meeting and talking to new people; the dinners were arranged so that each guest knew at least two other guests but had the chance to meet someone new as well. Finally, the participants did not have prior knowledge of what I was looking for; they were simply told that I was interested in studying conversational style.

The conversations were audio tape-recorded and transribed. Since the focus of the study was turn-taking style, special attention was paid in the transcription to overlap and pause, the length of each being measured in syllables and seconds, respectively. Finally, a one-hour segment was chosen from each conversation to be analysed and compared.

RESULTS

Analysis of the segments yields two important conclusions. First, there were more occasions of overlap in both the English and the Spanish conversations than was expected considering Sacks, Schegloff and Jeffersons's claim that overlap is rare, or common but brief. And second, the duration of overlap in the Spanish conversation was still much greater than that of the English conversation.

In order to find the overall amount of overlap, I looked at the beginning of every utterance (back-channel, main-channel, long stories, short answers) to see how many began in overlap. In the English conversation, 48.8% of the utterances began in overlap. In the Spanish conversation, 50% began in overlap. In both cases, then, overlap was common, and the frequency of overlap was essentially the same. However, I then measured the length of the instances of overlap in syllables and found that the average length of an overlap in the English conversation was only 2.88 syllables, while the average length of an overlap in the Spanish conversation was 4.56 syllables. At first glance, this difference, two or three syllables, would seem insignificant, even when people are speaking at a relaxed speed. However, considering the fact that there were many instances of overlap that were very short in both the Spanish and the American conversations, there must have been some instances that were substantially longer in the Spanish conversation for the average length of overlap in each conversation to differ as much as they did. Finally, I went back to look at what was causing so many instances of overlap in both conversations, and why some were so much longer in the Spanish one.

Overlaps in both conversations were caused by various patterns that happened frequently and that were usually unintentional. For example, overlap was often caused by simultaneous starts. This is a situation in which the floor is free, everyone has equal right to speak, and two speakers choose to start at the same time. (This pattern is mentioned in Sacks, et. al., but it is apparently assumed to be infrequent.) Overlap also resulted when the first speaker paused as though she was finished, but then went on to add something after a second speaker had started, for example, when a first speaker was thought to have finished a question, but then added a tag or an alternative. Other common patterns that caused overlap were interruptions to ask for additional information or clarification, or to make a joke. This type of overlap was intentional, but it was not seen as inconsiderate because it provided information that was necessary at a specific moment. Still another situation that produced overlap occurred when two or more speakers had the same information to share; they often overlapped by telling a story or explaining something together.

These patterns described above were common in both the American and the Spanish conversations and caused the majority of the occurences of overlap. What, then, accounts for the difference in the average length of the overlaps in these two conversations? The answer seems to lie in three patterns that were found far more frequently in the Spanish conversation than in the American one. Those three patterns were longer back-channel utterances, more frequent and longer lasting collaborative sequences, and the tendency to continue speaking when overlap occurs.

Longer back-channel utterances.

Back-channel utterances, as defined in this study, are utterances that add to the quality but not the semantic content of the conversation. In other words, they don't receive or require a response, and their purpose is to show listening and interest. These include mainly utterances like "uh-huh" and "yeah", which show listening and understanding, utterances like "wow" and "you're kidding", that show some type of reaction, and utterances like "that's nice" and "cool", that make a general comment. In English, these backchannel utterances are relatively short, and the Spanish equivalent was often longer. For example, instead of a simple "mhm", or "uh-huh", it was not uncommon to hear the Spanish participants say something like "sí, no, es verdad, sí (yes, yes, it's true, yes)" or "hombre, sí, sí (for sure, yes, yes)". Likewise, instead of saying "oh", a Spaniard might say "ah, de acuerdo (oh, I understand)", or instead of saying "wow", she might say "jo, pues vaya (jeez, well wow)" or "caramba, vaya cosas (wow, such things)".

These few extra syllables can add up, and they contributed to the tendency toward longer overlap in the Spanish conversation, but the type of backchannel that really caused more overlap involved repetition. It occurred when the person listening repeated or slightly reworded what the speaker just said as a way of showing understanding. In example (1), Marisa repeats part of the phrase that she has just heard, but her intonation and volume are more similar to Anne's back-channel comment than to an actual turn that was meant to be heard.

(1)

Paula: y porque ellas tienen sus reglas y sus *cosas/
Marisa: *Sí/ tie/nen *reglas, es claro/
Anne: *Sí/
Juana: *Y estás a/llí an plan en convento...

A similar form of backchannel involved prediction, rather than repetition. It was common, in the Spanish conversation, for the listener to finish the speaker's sentence right along with her to show understanding, as in example (2).

(2)

Marisa: Bueno, (una mujer italiana) vino sin saber nada y a la semana, usaba elsubjuntivo y los

Marisa: tiempos compuestos, pero vamos, nada, hombre, todo es *es igual/
Emi: *muy pare/cido, sí

While backchannel involving repetition and prediction happened five times in the English conversation, it occurred 38 times in the Spanish one.

Collaborative sequences.

The second major cause of longer overlap is the use of collaborative sequences, which occured much more frequently in the Spanish conversation. As the participants confirmed in the interviews, these collaborative sequences are genuinely cooperative in nature and they include completing another speaker's sentence, repeating or rewording what a previous speaker has just said, and contributing to a topic as though one had the floor when, technically, one doesn't.

The first of these collaborative patterns, completing another speaker's sentence, occurs when the "next speaker produces a syntactically fitted continuation of first speaker's utterance" (Lerner, 1989). Utterances of this type are different from the sentence completions classified as backchannel above for two reasons. First, they are responded to or acknowledged. But more importantly, they are often invited. In the Spanish conversation, many times one speaker pauses midthought, and a second speaker continues the thought, sometimes right along with the first speaker. In some instances, the first speaker pauses to think of a word or to decide how to say something, in which case the second speaker jumps in to help her out. But many times, the pause is accompanied by a rising intonation that the participants said they interpreted as meaning "you know what I'm going to say", so they said it along with the speaker. This happens in example (3).

(3)

Marisa: ...porque... le han suspendido justo en la asignatura claro...
Juana: que mejor lo hacía

Marisa's first utterance ends with a rising intonation and clearly needs completing. Juana does not know the woman who failed, so she is not helping to tell a story that both she and Marisa know; rather, she is guessing about what Marisa wants to say, based on the context and the intonation. The same intonation causes overlap when continuation of the first utterance is so obvious that the second speaker goes on with a new thought while the first speaker completes her own sentence at the same time.

(4)

Emi: Pues a mí me tocase cocinar yo creo que nunca, vamos para allí yo creo que nunca comería

---

Emi: o sea que mejor que si cada uno, *hace lo que quiera./
Marisa: Sí, yo *no, you cuan/do vine no tenía idea...

The first part of Emi's turn ends in rising intonation and is followed by a pause; it needs to be finished. However, the sentence completion is so obvious that Marisa goes on to something else while Emi finishes her own sentence in overlap.

A second type of collaborative sequence involves repeating or rewording what a previous speaker has just said. In the following situation, everyone agrees that being afraid to tell your parents that you're living with someone is ridiculous, and everyone says so. Because there is so much overlap, a good deal of the recorded conversation is unintelligible. However, in what can be heard, there is a lot of repetition.

(5)

Anne: y tienen un contestador automático por si llama, la madre y
Emi: *(muffled———
Marisa: *Pues vaya follón, no?
Paula: ha *(muffled)
Juana: Por *eso la madre (mufld)?

Anne:
Emi: ———)/ parece fatal/
Marisa: (muffled———) si se van de visita,/
Paula:
Juana: Lo veo un poco, yo se lo digo./ se van de visita, y ven allí todo lo de la chica

---

Anne: *Se/ va la *chica/ A mí tam*bien/
Emi:
Marisa: *bue- *sí/
Paula: eso eso es *un/ po*co,/ *(muffled)/

Juana: *Me pare/ce ridículo. Es *un poco/ ridí-

Anne:
Emi: *me parece ridículo/
Marisa: *(muffled)/ *aparte de ridícu/lo, es que me parece angustioso, por*que si/ vienen
Paula: *Es/ un *poco,/
Juana: *decirlo/ *(muffled————)/ *claro/

Anne: *claro/
Emi: *Pero todavía pasa esto/
Marisa: al *vienen/ un fin de se*mana tienes que sacar/ toda *la ropa/—
Paula:
Juana: *la ropa/

Again, this type of utterance is different from the repetitions that were classified as backchannel because they are acknowledged. For example, when Juana says "se van de visita", she is not merely showing that she understands or agrees with Marisa's comment; she repeats Marisa's comment as a way of starting her own comment, which is different and new ("se van de visita, y ven allí todo lo de la chica") and which the others in the group listen to and comment on ("se va la chica").

It seems that, in the Spanish conversation, these first two types of collaborative sequences (completing another speaker's sentence, and repeating or rewording what a previous speaker has said) take the place of the backchannel utterances involving prediction and repetition. Indeed, they are similar, except that collaborative sequences are acknowledged while backchannel utterances remain in the background. This may account for the fact that one third of the utterances in the American conversation were said to be backchannel, only one fifth of the utterances in the Spanish conversation fit into that category.

The final type of collaborative sequence that, like the others, was more common in the Spanish conversation involved contributing to a topic as though one had the floor when technically one didn't. Specific instances of this type of sequences involved answering a question directed at someone else, contributing to an explanation given by someone else, or defending a comment made by someone else as though one had said it oneself. The example (6) shows the first two of these patterns. First, Emi answers the question that Paula asked Marisa, then Juana adds to Paula's answer.

(6)

Marisa: Si oí un reportaje de horas en la televi*sión/ y han y han encontrado agendas con
Paula: *Sí/ pero

>>>

Marisa: direcciones *de los/ *de los/ pisos, (muf*fled——)/
Paula: *pero Ma/risa, *eso/ Sabes como funciona ETA? *Funciona a/sí

Marisa: *yeah/
Paula: *(muffled————) en pirámide. Exacto. *O sea,/ cogen a los tres/ gordos e inmediata-
Emi: *Cuando unos bajan otros suben y (muf fled————————) o sea,/

Marisa: yeah
Paula: mente hay tres más que son gordos así que no los han cogido
Emi: Y que nadie conoce

Marisa: *ah,/ es un poco...
Paula: Y que nadie conoce porque *en ese momento/...
Emi: *porque porque son otros per/son*as

As for defending a comment made by someone else as though one had said it oneself, that can be distinguished from overlap that occurs when two people simply tell a story together, which occured in the American and the Spanish conversations, by the way the overlapping utterances are phrased. One speaker starts telling about something; she has the floor. The others know about the topic, so they contribute too. This results in a sharing of the floor, so that eventually, everyone is telling everyone else what they all already essentially know. But instead of just adding something, they phrase their comment as though they had been telling the story in the first place. In example (7), Emi starts out telling about the traffic problems and the strikes in Madrid, but soon, she, Juana and Marisa are all telling about the strikes to each other.

(7)
Emi: ...pero esto ya es España hijas, *así da gusto/
Juana: *así funcio/na *todo/ cla*ro/
Marisa: *están/ todo el día de huelgas, eh *es/-

Emi: *Sie/mpre está Madrid así con
Juana:
Marisa: tuvieron como dos meses con el los autobuses y el me*tro

Emi: *huelga con manifestaciones/ Eso debe ser un caos total... todavía hay fiesta
Juana: *Es que Madrid es un catástrofe/ de ciudad
Marisa:

Emi: por allí
Juana: No, pero es una ciudad muy descabalgada, por favor .
Marisa: Es que no está preparada

Emi:
Juana:
Marisa: para tanta gente y tanto coche... un día se van a parar los coches se van a atascar y no

Emi:	*sí/
Juana:	Pues sí
Marisa:	va a haber quien los saque no si va- tiene que sacarlos con grúas *por/que es

Emi:	*sí, sí/
Juana:	Es que ya no hay espacio.
Marisa:	imposible, *está,/

When Juana says "así funciona todo (that's how everything works)", she is summarizing what Emi has just said, but the structure of her utterance and the intonation she uses make it seem as though she is continuing her own sentence. Actually, this is the first comment she has made on the topic. Similarly, the phrase "es que", used twice by Juana and once by Marisa, literally means "it's that", but it also seems to imply "I mean". In the passage above, Juana and Marisa seem to be explaining what previous speakers have said, as though they had said it themselves. This sharing of summaries and explanations through language results in a sharing of the floor that manifests itself in longer overlap and that, while present in the English conversation, was much more common in the Spanish conversation.

Continued speaking during overlap.

The third and final reason for longer overlap in the Spanish conversation was the tendency to continue speaking when overlap occured. In both conversations, when one speaker started a turn that would overlap with the speech of another who was already speaking, there were three typical reactions. First, the overlap sometimes caused one or both speakers to hesitate or stutter. Second, the overlap sometimes caused one speaker or the other to stop. And third, sometimes speakers didn't seem to react at all to the overlap, but continued to talk until finished. While all three patterns occured in both conversations, the third pattern was much more frequent in the Spanish conversation. In the English conversation, there were 99 instances of overlap that lasted long enough for a speaker to react to it in one of the ways mentioned above, and 23% of the time neither speaker reacted. In the Spanish conversation, there were 141 instances of this type, and the Spanish women continued until finished without hesitating or stopping 48.2% of the time.

DISCUSSION

After interviewing the participants about previous interaction with the other culture, I found that the potential for cross-cultural misunderstandings was increased in those areas where turn-taking styles in English and Spanish were different. Two areas in particular deserve attention.

First of all, the differing quantities of overlap in each language was a potential cause of misunderstanding. As mentioned above, the greater amount of overlap in Spanish conversation, for the Spanish, showed warmth and sharing, whereas it inhibited the Americans who felt they had to try to be brave if they wanted to say something. But more importantly, the difference in the amount of overlap caused both groups of speakers to draw conclusions about the other group's character that were not always true. For example, the Spanish women in the study said that Americans often seemed less excited and less expressive than Spaniards, not spontaneous, and falsely polite. They also said that they thought Americans didn't really listen and didn't like to talk. On the other hand, the Americans felt that Spaniards seemed aggressive and never let anyone else have the floor. Neither group agreed with the characterizations of themselves made by the other group.

The second potential cause of misunderstanding involved the backchannel behaviors. Some of the listening behaviors used by the speakers are considered polite and sociable in one culture but not in the other. For example, for the Americans, short back-channel comments like "uh-huh" showed interest by allowing the other person to speak uninterrupted. This same behavior in Spanish implied a lack of interest and was interpreted as "yeah, okay, hurry up and finish". On the other hand, the Spanish said that longer back-channel comments showed that listeners were interested because they wanted to share the floor; they were having fun and being touched. For the Americans, longer back-channel comments prevented communications; they felt that the listeners were making too many comments, which showed that they weren't interested in listening.

To summarize, my data show that there are differences between Spanish and English turn-taking styles. There is more overlap in the Spanish conversation due to longer backchannel, collaborative sequences and the tendency to continue speaking when overlap occurs. Two important problems that can occur as a result of these differences are that each group may misinterpret the other's listening behavior and make incorrect judgements about their character.

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